

The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of Indias Partition

1. Ratings:

+35 / 5,865 / -4



The author, Narendra Singh Sarila, was the aide-de-camp to Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the last Viceroy of India, and had a ring-side view of the events just before and after Partition.

Sarila decided to write his book, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of Indias Partition* after he came across documents in the Oriental and Indian Collection of the British Library, London, in 1997 which revealed that the Partition of India may not have been totally unconnected with the British concern that the Great Game between them and the USSR for acquiring influence in the area lying between Turkey and India was likely to recommence with even greater gusto after the Second World War and the start of the Cold War. And to find military bases and partners for the same. Sarila also researched other historical British and the US State Departments archives for his book. **Incidentally, while many records have been unsealed, some important ones have not. Significantly, most of Mountbattens official correspondence during the period after Independence with London is still sealed, and unlikely to be made public anytime soon. This further fuels the controversy that the British Government has something to conceal regarding Partition and the question of Kashmir.**

Sarilas thesis rests on the fact that for nearly a hundred years prior to Partition, the British had engaged in what came to be known as the Great Game with tsarist Russia over influence in Trans Oxania and Central Asia. The British believed that the safety of their Indian empire and access to the oil fields in the Middle East lay in keeping the Russians at a distance beyond the Oxus river on the northern fringes of Afghanistan. British strategic interests demanded that they have access to and partners in the northwest of India even after Indias independence. Indeed, the start of the Cold War even before Indias independence made this even more imperative, and the USSRs invasion of Afghanistan nearly 30 years after independence confirmed British fears.

Sarila faults the Congress Party for not understanding the larger geo-political compulsions of Britain and for pursuing naïve policies that were in many cases counterproductive, but reinforced the feeling with both the Churchill and Attlee governments in Britain that Partition of India was necessary to protect British interests. Sarila does give credit, where it is due, to the Congress nationalists for mobilizing the masses in

India that eventually made British rule in India untenable.

Some of the examples of Congress missteps in the late 1930s and the early 40s were: (i) resigning from the provincial ministries in 1939 on the entry of India into WWII, and leaving the field open to Jinnah to assume the reins of government even though the Congress was sympathetic to the Allied cause (ii) launching Quit India movement in the middle of WWII when there were millions of Allied troops in India the movement was quickly quashed with no effect, (iii) not agreeing to joining the British Commonwealth until almost the 11th hour thereby raising British insecurity, and (iv) not giving any assurance to the British that they would cooperate on diplomatic and military matters after Independence.

These led the British to believe that their strategic interests could not be safeguarded in an India led by the Congress party. The British had other compulsions too: a prudent approach would require not putting all eggs in one basket. They also believed (incorrectly as it turned out later) that India would not survive as a single state given its heterogeneity, whereas Muslim-Pakistan stood a better chance of being a united, strategic partner. Lastly, by 1947, most British politicians and bureaucrats had come to loathe the Congress Party and had become distrustful of Hindu politicians.

A mistake that the Congress Party made was to accept the Muslim League as part of the Interim Government without extracting a concession that the League also join the Constituent Assembly and stop any future Direct Actions. This enabled the League to play an obstructionist role in the Interim Government without facing any consequences.

According to Sarila, Protected by British power for so long and then focused on a non-violent struggle, the Indian leaders were ill prepared, as independence dawned, to confront the power play in our predatory world. They had failed to see through the real British motivation for their support to the Pakistan scheme and take remedial measures. Nor did they understand that, at the end of the Raj, America wanted a free and united India to emerge and to find ways to work this powerful lever.

Jinnah, by contrast, had a better understanding of British motivations and the growing American influence on British policy, and used this to greater effect. He cooperated better with the Allied war effort, did not embarrass the British government, and was rewarded by a British policy that nudged events towards Partition. An example is cited of Nehrus sister, Vijayalaxmi Pandit, leading the charge in 1946 at the UN to pass a resolution critical of apartheid (South Africa was a close British ally at the time) with the support of the developing countries. This was at a time when Indias own fate was to be decided. This diplomatic success won India little laurels, except confirmed the fears in the minds of the British about what might come to pass under a Congress-led India. By contrast, when the Communist Chinese finally gained recognition in the UN in 1972, their diplomats were ordered by Peking to stay quiet for several years, and they made no moves at the UN. Even today, Beijing rarely sponsors or vetoes UN resolutions, preferring to reach consensus in back-door deals in advance. There are numerous other examples to cite of Nehrus naïveté in dealing with foreign affairs (too many to summarize in this review).

Jinnah, it is revealed, also had secret correspondence with Churchill during the war and

thereafter. The details of this correspondence are not known, except that Jinnah sought his help in reigning in the Viceroy in Delhi and promised support to Britain after independence to make the case for Pakistan. Jinnah's cooperation with the British dovetailed with their efforts to carve out a friendly sphere of influence in the North West. It is also possible that he received advice to be intransigent during negotiations with the Congress, because the reward would be his Pakistan. This he proceeded to do with great flourish, with tacit British support behind the scenes.

Field Marshall Wavell, Viceroy of India, 1943-47, and predecessor of Mountbatten concluded that India had to be partitioned to preserve British interests, and even drew maps (eerily similar to the Sir Cyril Radcliffe division of India) as early as 1946 that showed the desired boundary demarcation. Sarila writes, **While in London, Wavell, on 31 August 1945, called on Churchill. According to Wavell's account: 'He warned me that the anchor [himself] was now gone and I was on a lee shore with rash pilots...His final remark, as I closed the door of the lift was: "keep a bit of India."'** Churchill, no longer Prime Minister, believed that the Attlee government, then in power, having decided to grant India independence, was not in favor of Partition and would sacrifice British interests in their haste to grant freedom to India. Attlee, who served as Churchill's deputy in the War Cabinet and the Defence Committee during the Second World War, was fully alive to British interests.

Indeed, under Attlee, Britain's position at this stage (August, 1945) could be summarized as follows:

1. The British military was emphatic on the value of retaining its base for defensive and offensive action against the USSR
2. Wavell was quite clear that this objective could not be achieved through partition - keeping a bit of India-because the Congress Party after independence would not cooperate with Britain on military and strategic matters;
3. While Labour leaders did not agree with Wavell that all was lost with the Congress Party, Attlee was, nonetheless, ready to support the division of India as long as the responsibility could not be attributed to Britain

Britain, then proceeded to assiduously implement this policy, through both the Churchill and Attlee governments. Mountbatten inherited this policy that Wavell had helped formulate. This policy necessitated that the corridor running from Baluchistan, Sind (for the port of Karachi), NWFP, northern Kashmir to Sinkiang be placed under a friendly regime. At the same time, Britain did not want to place any more territory than minimally necessary to serve their strategic interests

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The British had a few hurdles to overcome:

1. Jinnah had to be installed as the sole spokesman of Indias Muslims, even though the Muslim League could muster only two governments in the five provinces of India that the League demanded to be part of Pakistan in the 1946 elections (Bengal and Sind the latter being possible only through a tie-breaker vote cast by the British governor of Sind). **Significantly, Muslim League could not form governments in Punjab (Unionists), NWFP (Congress), and Assam (Congress).**
2. Jinnah had to be made to accept a truncated Pakistan with partitioned Punjab and Bengal
3. **NWFP, which had a Congress ministry in 1946 and a 95% Muslim population, had to be made part of Pakistan**
4. Congress Party had to be persuaded to join the British Commonwealth
5. The Americans, who favored a united India, had to be persuaded that the Partition was the only inevitable outcome given Hindu-Muslim question
6. **The blame for Partition had to rest with Indians, not the British**

On each of the above issues, the British succeeded brilliantly. They continuously raised the smokescreen of protection of Muslim rights and gave Jinnah an effective veto on all proposals not acceptable to the League. The Cabinet Mission Plan was used successfully to persuade Indians (and world opinion) that the Partition was the only reasonable outcome. These helped Jinnah position himself as the sole spokesman. Jinnah was persuaded to accept a truncated Pakistan by Mountbatten who basically told Jinnah that if

didn't accept Partition, there would be no Pakistan. The Cabinet Mission Plan, by providing an alternative to Partition, also persuaded Jinnah to accept a smaller Pakistan. Nehru/Patel were tempted to swallow the bitter pill of losing NWFP by being promised a quick transfer of power. **The Congress stabbed the Khudai Khidmatgars and Dr. Khan Sahib, Chief Minister, NWFP by agreeing to a unique referendum that was not implemented in any other British province, even though Congress already had the peoples mandate in 1946. Congress then boycotted the referendum, and the fate of NWFP was decided by a narrow margin of 50.28% of the electorate.** Thus, NWFP was handed to Pakistan without a contest by the thinnest of margins. Had the Congress and the Khudai Khidmatgars (they boycotted for fear of violence by the Muslim League) contested the elections, NWFP may well have voted for India and Pakistan would have been stillborn. Congress agreed to join the Commonwealth after Mountbatten promised all his help in integrating the princely states in India. The British, to their credit, even as they assisted in the birth of Pakistan, ensured that what remained of India was consolidated by the accession of the princely states to it.

Mountbatten did India a huge service by taking independence as an option off the table from the princely states. They had only two choices: accede to India or to Pakistan. The Americans, even though did not want to see India balkanized and favored the emergence of a united India, were made to believe that Partition was the only option by the British. Once the Indian politicians had accepted Partition, the American voice for Indian unity was muted, and the blame for it passed on to Indians.

On Kashmir, the record is also quite clear: once the Pakistani raiders entered Kashmir, Mountbatten goaded Nehru to take the matter to the UN, where the British succeeded in closing military options for India and legitimizing the locus standi of Pakistan. In the open forum of the UN, the British could no longer conceal their bias for Gilgit and Baltistan to be joined with Pakistan as part of an essential corridor to Central Asia.

Sarila writes that the British Pakistan Strategy succeeded brilliantly. Pakistan joined the Baghdad Pact and later, CENTO to form the defensive barrier against Soviet intentions in the Middle East, and went on to provide bases to the US for U-2 overflights. Later Pakistan provided the US access to China to pressurize the Soviets and provided a base against the Soviets in the Afghan war.

Sarila asks, would the 1962 Sino-India clash have occurred had India remained united? Would the Indian subcontinent have been nuclearized in the 20th century but for Partition? Would the communal virus have spread throughout Pakistan and India in recent years, but for Partition? The genie of Muslim terrorism centered around Pakistan has made British policies come full circle. Some of the roots for its emergence lay in Partition. Would undivided India have been able to absorb 500 millions Muslims today in its midst?

Sarila summarises, "Once the British realized that the Indian nationalists who would rule India after its independence would deny them military cooperation under a British Commonwealth defence umbrella, they settled for those willing to do so by using religion for the purpose. Their problem could be solved if Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League Party, would succeed in his plan to detach the northwest of India abutting Iran, Afghanistan and Sinkiang and

establish a separate state there - Pakistan. The proposition was a realizable one as a working relationship had been established between the British authorities in India and Jinnah during the Second World War and he was willing to cooperate with Britain on defence matters if Pakistan was created."

The British strategy worked brilliantly in protecting the now Anglo-American interests but there were substantial gruesome and tragic side effects partition-related displacement, migration and massacre of millions of people, and three wars between South Asian neighbors. The author hints and perhaps contends that the growth of radical Islamic fundamentalists in the region and the destruction of the World Trade Center (9/11) had its roots in the partition. I could not put this eminently readable book down until I finished it. I recommend it to any student of South Asian and World History.

2. Ratings:

+0 / 1,598 / -1



yar Pakistani members ko bhi puch lo if they agree that undivided India would have been a world power by now... and whether they would be happy to be part of world SECULAR power or ISLAMIC country but strong power.

Pakistani toh khus hain even if no world power... cchahe choti country ho par Islamic hai .. lagta hai unke liye yeh kafi hai.

Yeh United India and world power sirf Indians ko acha lagta hai.. hum hi sochte hain ki division na hota toh ham world power hote...

Koi Pakistani bhi aise sochte hain kya ? mujhe nai pata?